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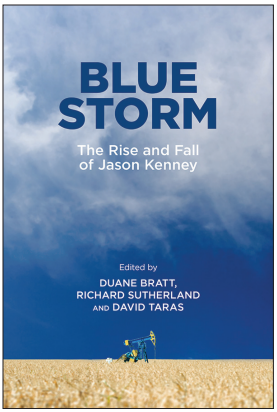


# BLUE STORM: THE RISE AND FALL OF JASON KENNEY

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# Playing the Populist Victim: Women, Gender, Representation, and the United Conservative Party

*Melanee Thomas*[1]

## Introduction

Alberta is rarely seen as a place where one would expect to see gender equality or feminist politics. It is instead stereotyped as a bastion of conservative thought, wherein the prototypical Albertan is perceived to be a rural cowboy or an oil and gas roughneck: always a man and often white, conservative, and devoutly Christian (Banack 2016; Wesley 2021a). Despite being one of the most diverse, urban places in Canada (Statistics Canada 2021), Albertans who do not fit these mostly masculine stereotypes are at best seen as an odd fit; at worst, they are erased from the province's identity and key constituencies. In this context, the idea that Alberta's provincial government and the conservative parties that form it are somewhat cool to women and gender equality is well founded (Harder 2003).

The 2015 provincial election and subsequent New Democratic Party (NDP) government seemed to upset this narrative. The premier, Rachel Notley, had consistently raised issues relating to gender, equality, and diversity in the legislature since her first election in 2008 (Thomas 2019a), fielded a gender-balanced slate of candidates for the first time in Canadian

history (Thomas 2019b), and appointed parity cabinets throughout the duration of her government. Several NDP MLAs were the first to use gender-neutral pronouns in the legislature, and the substantive discussion of, and policy developments relating to gender and equity issues skyrocketed compared to previous governments (Thomas 2019a).

With the election of the United Conservative Party (UCP) in 2019, some may have been tempted to conclude that women, gender, and equity issues were simply moved off the government's agenda, or that the party was simply silent on, or quietly hostile to these issues (see Harder 2003). I argue that only characterizing the UCP's relationship with gender this way is a mistake. Instead, like many conservative and populist parties, gender in general and masculinity in particular are both central to the party, and strongly structure its policy priorities and general approach to representation. This does not mean, however, that gender outside of men and masculinity, or women are well represented by the UCP government. The UCP fails to meet the most basic thresholds of adequate gendered representation now expected from political parties and elected representatives. Instead, like other populist conservative parties, their chosen representations of women and gender issues are posed and Janus-faced (see Akkerman 2015; Celis and Childs 2020), with carefully crafted victim narratives designed to represent a different constituency or ideology than women or a multifaceted understanding of gender (see Gordon 2021).

I build this argument in three stages. First, I outline how the UCP can be understood in a gendered political context. Though it is a new political party, the UCP reflects larger trends relating to gender and party politics. Second, I outline and empirically assess the UCP's performance in four areas of political representation relating to women and gender: descriptive, substantive, symbolic, and affective. Of these, affective representation is particularly interesting, because if can be particularly important for conservative parties. A part of new understandings of feminist democratic representation, affective representation focusses on process and unlike earlier iterations of feminist examinations of representation, it explicitly aims to take conservative advocacy for women and gender issues seriously (Celis and Childs 2020). Despite this opportunity, the UCP fails worst at affective representation. I conclude by outlining potential changes the UCP could enact to better represent women and gender.

## Situating the United Conservative Party in the Gender and Politics Literature

Given its recent formation in 2017, it may be tempting to see the UCP as a blank slate with respect to gender, equity, representation, and politics. Yet, the UCP does not exist in a vacuum. Contextualizing the UCP in a larger gender and politics context helps explain its approaches to women and gender, particularly with respect to when and how women merit representation as a group, or when equity-related policies are forwarded on women's behalf. Here I address three: stereotypes and status threat, issue ownership, and ambidextrous positioning with respect to gender (Gordon 2021) in populist political parties.

### *Stereotypes and Status Threat*

In general, politics is strongly structured by gender, because politics exists within a larger society that operates on long-standing gendered norms and stereotypes. Because of this, gender stereotypes are relevant for politics. Stereotypes are shared beliefs about someone's attributes and behavior based on their group membership (Bauer 2013). Often rigid and blunt, stereotypes can be positive, negative, or neutral, and address ideas about character, competence, appearance, and skills. For example, women are stereotyped as kind, supportive, and warm; as pretty and petite; as imaginative and creative; and as gullible, subordinate, and nagging. In contrast, men are stereotyped as competitive and courageous; as strong and muscular; as analytical and good with numbers; and as arrogant and egotistical. Because many of the stereotypes associated with men are also linked to leadership (Eagly and Karau 2002), men in politics are more likely to be described as driven and leaders (Schneider and Bos 2014, 255), as they benefit from overlapping stereotype profiles.

Many gender stereotypes stem from social roles—that is, the different family, social, and occupational roles taken on predominantly by women and men (Schneider and Bos 2019, 175; Kerevel and Atkeson 2015, 733). Women are stereotyped as caring and mothering, even if they are not mothers or carers themselves, because women are far more likely than men to occupy caring roles. This includes providing care for children, family, and friends (Statistics Canada 2018), or being more likely be

employed in caregiving occupations (Moyser 2017). Stereotypes generated from these social roles are often abstractions, and when an individual from a stereotyped group appears to be incongruent with them, they may be sanctioned. These sanctions for role incongruity extend to politics, as the stereotypes associated with being a "good" woman and a "good" politician do not overlap. Instead, women politicians are seen as "deviant" women who do not possess typically feminine traits, yet who cannot quite conform to the positive traits desired of politicians. They become cold rather than emotional (*feminine)* and calculating rather than assertive (*masculine, politician*, see Schneider and Bos 2014; 2019).

Stereotypes based on social roles are certainly malleable over time, especially as women and men move into different roles. However, instead of transforming the gendered social expectations of those roles, it is expected that women who move into more traditionally masculine roles or fields will become more like men (Diekman and Eagly 2000). This suggests that stereotypes about men predominate the "ideal" image many have in their minds, particularly when it comes to venues where men predominate, like politics. It also implies that more traditional stereotypes about women are not necessarily displaced as women take on "newer" roles.

Gender stereotypes are relevant for analyzing and understanding the UCP for several reasons. First, as noted above, the stereotypical image of the prototypical Albertan is almost always highly masculinized and often conservative. This suggests that many in Alberta may expect that their elected representatives will also be masculinized conservatives. Second, the competitive and zero-sum nature of politics means that for some men, losing to women in a neutral, non-political context makes them more likely to subscribe to sexist views and to prefer men's leadership in politics (Mansell et al. 2021). For Albertans in the lead up to the 2019 election, this sense of loss was driven, in part, by two things: a left-leaning party in government and the ongoing bust in the oil and gas industry. Both were framed as a loss of an established order, with a degree of entitlement informing part of the desire to have the old order back (see Gerson 2019). Importantly, the oil and gas bust was popularly framed as primarily about men's losses (Unwin 2016) and used to argue by some conservatives that greater equity in politics (e.g., gender-based budgeting) was an explicit attack on Alberta's men (Dawson 2018).

Much of the UCP's rhetoric plays into this narrative, especially with respect to its defence of oil and gas as a waning industry (see Bratt, Clark, and Rioux in this volume). Part of this defence can be reasonably characterized as sense of grief for the loss of benefits and goods that previously existed under boom times. Though this sense of grief is certainly not restricted to men, the politicization of it has, in other areas, been located with men when it is accompanied by a sense of entitlement to, or a perception that those benefits have been unreasonably snatched away (see Kimmel 2017). Similarly, conservatism tends to surge in response to nostalgia for the stability of the past, and this reasonably characterizes many Albertans who long for the return of a booming fossil fuel industry. This nostalgia may be accompanied by a sense of threat and corresponding defensive response if it is perceived to be accompanied by greater social and political equity—the sense is that their loss is someone else's gain.

For example, despite popular narratives, support for Donald Trump's presidency in the United States was not driven by (often explicitly stated) economic anxiety, but rather perceived threats to dominant groups' status (e.g., white Americans, men) in relation to equity-deserving groups including women, visible and racialized minorities, and 2SLGBTQA+ folks (Mutz 2018). This is one reason why Trump's accusation that Clinton was "playing the woman card" resonated: it was most persuasive amongst voters who perceive that any equitable advances for women come predominantly at men's expense and/or that women overplay things like sexual harassment to inappropriately sanction men (Cassese and Holman 2018).

This parallels parts of the UCP's 2019 campaign. The party refused to drop Mark Smith, the UCP's candidate in Drayton Valley-Devon, despite him making explicitly homophobic statements as late as 2015, including likening sexual diversity to pedophilia and arguing that schools should be permitted to fire teachers simply for their sexual orientation. In response, many voters claimed to have supported him because the economy, specifically as it relates to oil and gas, was more important to them (Maimann 2019). Given the content of Smith's statements, it is difficult to interpret this as solely about the economy. Instead, as is the case with Trump in the United States, the speed with which some dismissed others' constitutionally guaranteed right to freedom from the explicit discrimination evident in Smith's comments, suggests the NDP's explicit support of women,

gender, sexual diversity, and equity (Thomas 2019a) may have constituted a threat to some voters, and their defensive reaction to that threat made the UCP an appealing alternative.

### *Issue Ownership*

I can understand skeptical readers dismissing the possibility that much of the UCP's rhetoric and support is driven by sexist, racist, or homophobic reactions to group hierarchies being potentially eroded by the NDP government or the oil and gas bust. In that context, it is worth observing that a standard feature of electoral politics—issue ownership—is also highly gendered. The idea of issue ownership is uncontroversial: political parties are ascribed ownership of an issue based on stereotypes and, at times, past performance. Once a party "owns" an issue, they are assumed to have a greater degree of competence on that issue than do other parties. Conservative parties in North America "own" the economy as an issue, while left-leaning parties "own" issues relating to social programs, such as health care and education (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Winter 2010).

Importantly, the role of stereotypes in issue ownership is key, because gender and gendered issues structure how voters perceive parties. This, in turn, helps build the association between a party and issues required to form issue ownership (Winter 2010). For the UCP, the actions of other conservative parties in Canada would reasonably inform the stereotypical issues a party like the UCP would own. For example, previous Progressive Conservative (PC) governments in Alberta had a long-standing track record of ambivalence and hostility towards women's advocacy (Harder 2003). At the federal level, the Reform Party explicitly argued there are "no women's issues" in hopes of rejecting equity-based group politics (Thomas 2017). Reform, the Canadian Alliance, and the merged Conservative Party of Canada all addressed gendered issues such as childcare only through tax credits (*ibid*.). Thus, the process that helps associate the economy with parties such as the UCP is decidedly not gender neutral, nor is the simple campaign slogan "jobs, jobs, jobs." When the "jobs" in question are primarily in industries such as oil and gas, while public sector jobs (held predominantly by women) are identified for cuts to positions and pay (Bennett 2020), it shows how the economy, as used by the UCP, is gendered and primarily, for them, about men.

### *Ambidextrous Populist Gender Positioning*

Like issue ownership, populist political parties are not readily seen as gendered, at least on the surface. Certainly, populism has been a feature of Alberta's politics for decades (Sayers and Stewart 2019) where various political parties argued they best protected regular people from victimization and abuse from "elites" (Gordon 2021). Key to these arguments is the construction of the victim, as evidenced by both conservative and progressive populist narratives. On one hand, more progressive populist appeals focus on rights, linking systemic racism, sexism, and class into systems of oppression that victimize equity-deserving groups (*ibid.*). In contrast, more conservative populist arguments in Canada construct different victims as part of their rhetoric, such as children, taxpayers, and perhaps most relevant for the UCP, the West, particularly with respect to how Western provinces, including Alberta, are "victimized" by the federal government (*ibid.*). Because populist arguments are a flexible tool, there is considerable disagreement about which pairings of victim and oppressor, regular people and elites are most important (*ibid.*, 45). This disagreement is often gendered, shedding light on how a political party understands when, why, and how gender becomes a relevant concept or when women as a group merit advocacy and policy attention.

The clearest statement of this is Gordon's (2021) examination of populist rhetoric in arguments advocating for tough-on-crime legislation (Bill C-10) and legislation in response to Supreme Court decisions invalidating Canada's prostitution laws (Bill C-36). Both bills were introduced by the Conservative Party of Canada while in government under Stephen Harper's leadership. On one hand, the populist rhetoric around Bill C-10 focused on being tough on crime for the sake of those victimized by someone else's criminal actions. In this, gender is virtually absent: only one speech from a conservative member of parliament addressing Bill C-10 mentioned gender at all, and most of the arguments failed to address how crime and violence are connected to systemic sexism or racism. On the other hand, though, the rhetoric around Bill C-36 was profoundly gendered, as "women and gender were at the very centre of many of the most frequent arguments" in support of the bill (*ibid.*, 51).

The reasons behind this ambidextrous use of gender as a populist rhetorical device are key for understanding the UCP. Gordon argues that "conservative actors in Canada selectively centre issues and sources of gender inequality, while conspicuously avoiding them in other contexts" (53). This dichotomy may reflect a strategic use of previously successful strategies, where a party knows it does not "need" to address gender to achieve its goals on one hand, while trying to explore new strategies to mitigate critique or expand support on the other. This sometimes means borrowing "political concepts and language from its progressive and liberal opponents to make its conservative case" (*ibid*., 55). Whether this borrowing is sincere is crucial for assessing how well populist parties represent women and gender. Assessing the quality of that representation is where we now turn.

## Finding Gender in Political Representation in Alberta under the United Conservative Party

Political representation typically involves five things: someone who is being represented; someone who is doing the representing; the thing or things that are being represented; a context where the representation takes place; and the things that are left out or excluded (Dovi 2009). In Alberta, by design, this means that voters in a district are represented by their MLA in the legislature. The key thing being represented is usually geography (e.g., the district itself) or party, given strong norms of party discipline. This potentially leaves out a whole host of things that could and, perhaps, should be represented. How, then, can gender's representation (or lack thereof) be credibly assessed in this context?

Feminist scholars have developed useful tools for conceptualizing representation that allows gendered representation to be assessed in several ways. Most are based on Hannah Pitkin's (1967) classic statement of representation, focusing on descriptive, substantive, and symbolic representation. To this, I add a fourth conceptualization of representation called affective representation (Celis and Childs 2020). Each is defined and discussed below.

### *Descriptive Representation*

Descriptive representation focusses on describing the gender composition and balance of a legislature, on the assumption that women's presence will help ensure women's perspectives and experiences are brought forward into policymaking (Mansbridge 1999). However, even Pitkin herself was skeptical of descriptive representation insofar as it simply described a legislature's composition and not its activity. Similarly, it is too easy to describe legislatures along a gender binary, only looking at women and men, without examining other relevant features of representatives' identities (Celis and Childs 2020). This renders descriptive representation a preliminary, blunt, but necessary step in assessing how gender is represented in any given political context.

Here, I present two measures of descriptive representation: nominated candidates for election and cabinet appointments. Both measures directly address how a party leader in particular views gender and how it should be represented. Candidates capture who is available to be elected to a party's caucus. Patterns of gender bias are commonly found across political parties in Canada, as parties consistently nominate women in districts they are less likely to win (Thomas and Bodet 2013). It is clear, however, that if a party leader wants to ensure their candidates are balanced across genders, they will direct their party organizers to do so (Thomas 2017; 2019b). As leader, it is reasonable to assume that Jason Kenney knows this, as he promised as much at the outset of his campaign to lead the UCP (CBC News 2018). Similarly, as premier or prime minister, party leaders in government in Canada determine the structure of government through their cabinet. Thus, not only are the demographics of cabinet ministers important, but so too are the portfolios they are responsible for (Annesley, Beckwith, and Franceschet 2019).

Both measures of descriptive representation show that representing women is not a priority for the UCP; instead, the representational focus is on men. This is perhaps unsurprising, given how the UCP is best contextualized within gender and politics outlined above. With respect to candidates, while they only make up 36 per cent of the Canadian population (Ouellet, Shiab, and Gilchrist 2021), white men were 54 per cent of the UCP's candidates in 2019. In contrast, white men were only 34 per cent

of NDP candidates that same year. Women overall comprised only 30 per cent of the UCP's candidates (compared to 53 per cent of the NDP's). Both parties nominated about the same proportion of visible and racialized minority candidates (7 per cent for the NDP and 8 per cent for the UCP), but because the UCP nominated so few women overall, racialized women are a larger proportion of the UCP's women candidates overall (27 per cent compared to the NDP's 15 per cent). To date, it is not yet known how many candidates, if any, identified outside the gender binary.[2]

Cabinet appointments are similar. Here, I only focus on the twenty-three individuals appointed to the original UCP cabinet, or added in a subsequent shuffle; as a result, associate ministers are excluded from this analysis. Like candidates, 52 per cent of UCP cabinet ministers are white men. Similarly, white women comprise 22 per cent of the UCP's candidates and cabinet ministers. Visible and racialized minority women and men are present at the same rate (13 per cent each). Notably, very few women serve in a high profile, powerful cabinet ministry. Those who do are white (e.g., LaGrange in Education, Savage in Energy).

How does this match with Kenney's commitment to recruit more women and diverse candidates? Some may look at this record and argue it is good enough. Women are certainly present at levels thought to create a critical mass, typically understood as 30 per cent; however, it is important to note that this argument is based on a faulty reading of the literature (see Childs and Krook 2008). Others may argue that unless a legislature is a true microcosm of the population it is supposed to represent, then descriptive representation has not been achieved. Given how candid most party leaders are when they achieve gender parity amongst their candidates or in cabinet, it may be worthwhile asking leaders who choose not to ensure their candidates and ministers better match the population they are supposed to represent why this is less of a priority for them.

### *Substantive Representation*

Substantive representation addresses the shortcomings of descriptive representation by focussing more on action, asking who is "acting for" women with respect to policies, issues, inside the legislature itself. Scholars typically identify key issues important to women and then assess how well a legislature addresses them, if at all. While substantive representation

avoids the inactive pitfalls of descriptive representation, this definition creates its own challenges. Typically, researchers are choosing the issues that "best" capture women's "interests" in a top down manner (Celis and Childs 2020). These issues typically focus on policies that are known to disproportionately affect women with respect to the welfare state (e.g., health care, education, children, and childcare). In so doing, these analyses can miss issues of particular importance to diverse groups of women who, based on their communities may be more interested in issues and policies that, on the surface, do not necessarily look like traditional "women's issues" (Celis and Childs 2020). With that caveat in mind, I focus my analysis on women's substantive representation under the UCP in three areas: how women and gender are discussed in party platforms; the frequency, context, and content of when women and gender are raised in legislative debates; and the position of the Status of Women Ministry in cabinet.

The first two analyses—party platforms and legislative debates via *Hansard*—were conducted similarly. Simple keyword searches are used to assess the presence of the following key terms: gender, women, men, feminine, masculine, caregiving, caregiver, childcare, and diversity. This kind of analysis has been used in the past to assess how well women premiers substantively represented women during their time in government (Bashevkin 2019); given that, it seems an appropriate standard to hold other provincial governments, such as the UCP's, to as well.

Substantively, gender was not discussed much in the UCP platform in 2019. Women were mentioned a total of nine times, with men mentioned four times. What is perhaps more notable is where the platform is silent: equity, diversity, and gender are not at all present. In contrast, while the NDP platform mentioned women fewer times (four total), it also mentioned gender (N=4), equity (N=2), and diversity (N=4). The largest difference between the two platforms is with respect to mentions of childcare (NDP=20, UCP=0), as this reflects the importance of the NDP's $25/day childcare plan to their 2019 platform. None of the other search terms appeared in either party's platform.

*Hansard* data shows some striking similarities between how the UCP and the old PCs and Wildrose substantively discuss women and gender. Past analyses show that PC MLAs disproportionately used "women"

to refer to "men and women in uniform" during legislative statements (Thomas 2019a). While this is still the case, UCP MLAs have expanded their use of "men and women" to refer to men and women as Albertans (e.g., "men and women across Alberta," "men and women who built Alberta") or more specifically as workers in oil and gas (e.g., "men and women of the oil patch," "men and women in the industry"). Beyond this, women UCP MLAs are more likely to mention "women" in *Hansard*, often with explicit reference to issues emerging from Status of Women, and both UCP and NDP MLAs use terms like "gender-based violence" in reference to Clare's Law (discussed below as part of the analysis of affective representation). Overall, though, if the bulk of UCP MLAs' use of the term "women" is part of the rhetorical devices noted above, it does not meet the requirements for substantive representation as presented in the academic literature.

In contrast, NDP MLAs use "women" substantively differently in legislative debate in several ways. First, NDP MLAs are as much as three times more likely to mention the word "women," because they are more likely to mention women as part of substantive debate addressing women's equality, sexism, and misogyny, and women's under-representation in politics. However, NDP MLAs are more likely to mention "women" when addressing other issues, including housing, workforce participation, and the COVID-19 pandemic. NDP MLAs are also disproportionately likely to use terms like "gender," particularly with respect to calls for gender-based policy analysis. The overwhelming majority of content about the affordability and accessibility of childcare, elder care, caregiving benefits, and caregiver abuse also come from NDP MLAs. Finally, only NDP MLAs used terms like "feminine" and "masculine" in *Hansard*; most of these interventions addressed Bill 8 (Education Amendment Act) to draw attention to how negative remarks about gender identity expression (e.g., not feminine or masculine enough) affected students. Though this analysis could certainly be pushed further, it shows how MLAs can, in fact, use the language of women and gender to raise substantive issues.

Finally, the UCP's approach to the Status of Women Ministry is similar to its use of language in *Hansard*: it is closer to practice under previous PC governments, rather than a continuation of the substantive representation that occurred through the ministry under the Notley government. While the federal and other provincial governments have long-standing

units dedicated to the status of women, Alberta was the first to create a full department with its own deputy minister in 2015 (Ontario followed in 2017; see Thomas 2019a). After 2019, Status of Women is no longer a standalone ministry, but was instead merged into the Ministry of Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women, with a deputy minister primarily responsible for Culture. Thus, the importance and position of the Status of Women Ministry in Alberta was meaningfully eroded following the 2019 election.

How the Ministry of Culture, Multiculturalism, and Status of Women addresses women in their annual reporting (Government of Alberta 2020) strongly reflects Gordon's (2021) ambidextrous construction of the victim in conservative populist parties outlined above. On one hand, the annual report focuses on two pieces of legislation—the *Disclosure to Protect Against Domestic Violence* (Clare's Law) and the *Protecting Survivors of Human Trafficking Act*—focus on women as victims. The report highlights how the government of Alberta proclaimed a day for the Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting. Certainly, these issues are important, but it is telling how absent women are from other government priorities and policy discussions when they cannot be so easily framed as victims. This is also clear in the Status of Women's annual report, as women and the economy are mentioned only to highlight a continued investment in a program designed to support women who wish to pursue training and work in the skilled trades. Further details, including budgetary allocations are not provided there, suggesting that for the most part, women are conspicuously absent from larger policies and narratives about the economy and economy recovery. Childcare is not mentioned at all, and children are primarily discussed in contrast to adults with respect to participation in sport. This is a striking example of Gordon's argument that "conservative actors in Canada selectively centre issues and sources of gender inequality, while conspicuously avoiding them in other contexts" (53). It appears that, for the UCP, unless women can be framed as a particular kind of victim, they are conspicuously excluded from many substantive policy discussions and rationales. This, in turn, seriously hampers the substantive representation of women in Alberta.

### *Symbolic Representation*

Symbolic representation holds great potential to help show how well women are represented. Common representative symbols include flags, anthems, and landmarks to "stand for" a nation or a country. The presence of women in a legislature can be used as an example of how equal women and men are in politics, but other symbols are also useful, too (Celis and Childs 2020). For example, a standout role model can symbolize women's presence in politics, as can media coverage and framings of women "doing" politics. Other theorizations of symbolic representation ask who is, and is not, symbolically represented, as well as asking what symbols evoke for the represented (Lombardo and Meier 2014, in Celis and Childs 2020, 76–77).

One of the most potent symbols of women in Alberta politics predates the UCP's election in 2019. Arguably, the violence directed at Rachel Notley as Alberta's premier communicates much symbolically to Alberta's women about their place in politics here (see Thomas 2019a). Similarly, the assertion that the 2015 election result produced an "accidental" government could be interpreted as a symbolic denigration of an election result that brought a woman to the premier's office in the least common way: first through a general election (see Thomas 2018). There are few women in the UCP caucus who stand as symbols for women in politics, in part because so few of them are sufficiently high profile to be commonly identified as a potential symbol for even conservative women in politics.[3] Beyond this, the UCP routinely uses a series of symbols, including (blue) half-tonne trucks, and worksites commonly associated with oil and gas or construction. All of these are stereotypically masculine symbols connected to social role theory and the corresponding stereotypes highlighted earlier in this chapter. None of these symbols used by the UCP are designed to symbolize women in particular, and while it is certainly plausible that these symbols may resonate with some women—specifically, women who see symbols as benefitting their husbands and, thus, the "family unit"—it is also likely that many women find these symbols exclusionary and off-putting.

Across the most common measures of women's representation in politics, then—descriptive, substantive, and symbolic—the UCP fares poorly. It is not unreasonable to conclude that the UCP's representation of women is mediocre at best, and non-existent at worst. But this leaves space for a

new measure of representation that purports to make more serious space for conservative claims to be representing women: affective representation (Celis and Childs 2020).

### *Affective Representation*

Affective representation is the core idea of Celis and Childs' book, *Feminist Democratic Representation*. The problem they address is that for many, "women are not explicitly considered to be a group to which decision makers should be accountable" (2020, 29). Instead of focusing on the content of representation and how it relates to women, Celis and Childs instead focus on the *process*, asking who stands for and acts for differently *affected* groups of women. Here, they look specifically for group advocacy and account giving. Group advocacy allows for differently affected groups of women to advocate for what they need. Account giving requires representatives to return to those who advocated for their groups and give an account of what they did with that advocacy. This could include how it was included in a policy or piece of legislation, or it could address why the information provided through that advocacy was ultimately not used.

To be feminist, affective representation rests on three principles: inclusiveness, responsiveness, and egalitarianism.[4] Inclusiveness addresses the extent to which women's heterogeneous views are present in representation. Responsiveness asks if women, in all their diversity, broadly agree with what is being done in their name. And egalitarianism requires that all voices must be part of the processes where claims are received, considered, and deliberated, and then rejected or accepted. It requires a great deal of open and fairmindedness, both on the part of those providing group advocacy, and by elected representatives, particularly with their account giving back to those most affected by a policy.

Certainly, this argument is not without critique, as some have argued this conceptualization means that virtually anything could constitute women's representation. For Celis and Childs, this is what renders affective representation feminist: it avoids universalizing women's experiences and instead explicitly addresses differences across women. It expects those differences to be seriously considered and deliberated, and honestly reported as part of the policy process. It makes space across ideological

divisions, in part because the process as they outline it should not be tied to any one ideological perspective or view.

In sum, the process of affective representation requires sincere advocacy by representatives from affected groups, serious deliberation from elected representatives, honest accounting from elected representatives back to affected groups, and then judgement or endorsement of elected representatives' work by affected groups.

To assess the extent to which this is happening in Alberta, I examined the processes through which members of the public can engage in advocacy and consultation directly to the provincial government via the Government of Alberta's website (2021a). This ability to offer advocacy is a necessary, but insufficient condition for affective representation to take place. The results are a bit grim. At the time of writing, women are not included as a category for public engagement. Diversity and inclusion is included as a category, but the one engagement listed was an initiative of the previous NDP government and concluded in 2019. There, other necessary conditions for affective representation appear to be in place, including a report back to affected communities about what representatives heard and what action they took based on that advocacy, an outline of actions taken in response to information given in advocacy, and a solicitation for further feedback (Government of Alberta 2019).

Unfortunately, this process does not appear to be the current norm under the UCP. Instead, a keyword search for "women" brought up a single consultation: a working group on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). There is no public engagement, but rather a working group of five members of the public (Government of Alberta 2021b). As members of the public, the advisory group has no institutional power, and thus has no ability to enforce or implement their recommendations to the government. This is clear in the working group's mandate: it would only meet Celis and Childs' requirements for affective representation if it could be plausibly argued that the working group alone were sufficient to act as affected representatives. While I do not deny that it is plausible a working group could possibly fulfill this role for some narrowly defined policies, for an issue as grave and important as MMIWG, the absence of options for affected representatives to be involved in advocacy and accountability beyond the working group suggests this process does

not meet the requirements for meaningful affective representation. This is not to say the working group cannot or is not doing good work; on the contrary, I would contend the work of the working group is necessary and important, but it alone cannot be sufficient to meet these representational requirements.

Two interconnected examples show how, instead of engaging in affective representation, the UCP poses as representing women while actually presenting victim narratives that characterize populist conservative parties. First, in October 2021, the minister of jobs, economy and innovation in Alberta, Doug Schweitzer, explicitly stated, "A lot of women came back in the workforce as the school year began because a lot of women *took time off during COVID*. It disproportionately impacted women and we saw a lot of women return to the workforce looking for jobs in September" (May 2021, emphasis added).

Many reacted critically to this statement, as women's exit from the workforce due to COVID was driven by childcare centre and school closures, leaving parents scrambling given the obvious incompatibility between caring for children full time while simultaneously trying to work. This affected women's employment more than men's, a pattern candidly observed in several media reports, but also by banks (Desjardins and Freestone 2021), and consulting firms such as McKinsey & Company (2021) and PriceWaterhouseCoopers (2021). Yet, when members of the public, including me, observed that they expected the minister of jobs to be more attuned to these gendered effects of COVID, the minister reacted on social media by presenting himself as the victim of an unfounded attack, because he had previously acknowledged that some of COVID-19's economic effects were gendered (Schweitzer 2021). Some members of the public rejected this, instead asking for greater focus on what the UCP government was going to do with respect to COVID-19's gendered economic effects, specifically citing the UCP's budget and their reluctance to sign a childcare deal with the federal government (Bergstrom 2021). The minister's response was to block many who were critical, leading some to ask the minister explicitly how he thought his victim narrative contributed to affective representation (Wesley 2021b).

The second example relates to the childcare funding deal signed between the provincial and federal governments. For the UCP, securing

federal funding for childcare as offered by the federal government could have been used as an opportunity for the premier to reinforce his minister's claim that the UCP genuinely understands the gendered effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. That announcement could have been an ideal time to communicate how the UCP understands the economic benefits childcare investments produce, as these disproportionately come from mothers' participation in the labour force (Alexander et al. 2017). Instead, the announcement was characterized by the premier's repeated references to a common victim narrative from the UCP: that Alberta routinely gets an unfair deal from the federal government compared to other provinces (Leavitt 2021). This victim narrative appears so central to the UCP that it could not be displaced, even when presented with an easy opportunity to offer gender-based representation.

Celis and Childs clearly argue that affective representation, when done well, should increase trust in government. Thus, a third indicator to suggest this form of representation is not occurring under the UCP is a low level of trust in government, as evidenced by consistently high levels of disapproval for government action and performance. While the requirements for meeting affective representation are steep, the transparency, open-mindedness, fairness, and accountability required to achieve this type of representation are arguably not yet present. If they were, it may go some way to addressing the systematic unpopularity experienced by the UCP throughout much of their time in office, especially in 2020–21.

## Predicting a Path Forward

From its inception through its first term in government, the UCP fails to meet the most basic thresholds of adequate gender representation now expected from political parties and elected representatives. The party's performance with respect to descriptive representation is mediocre, as a third of its nominated candidates in 2019 were women, even though this threshold lags considerably behind its primary competitor in Alberta (the NDP). Arguably, the UCP performs most poorly with respect to affective representation, in no small part to reluctance to engage in sincere public engagement, or receive and digest candid public feedback. This approach renders affective representation effectively impossible. Instead, the best way to understand how the UCP approaches women and gender rests with

Janus-faced, ambidextrous populist parties, where they use gender and progressive language when it helps craft a useful victim narrative, and otherwise ignore or refuse to sincerely address gendered issues or policies that differently affect women.

Ironically, affective representation was developed, in part, to sincerely address how well conservative parties represent women and gender. While genuine affective representation would be an admirable goal for any political party because it is based on process and transparency, it is especially important for conservative parties who otherwise may be keen to avoid more conventional feminist representative actions. Thus, while it is plausible the UCP may continue to perform with mediocrity on some measures of women's representation (e.g., descriptive representation), their past performance on more substantive and affective forms of representation suggest that women and gender will continue to be poorly represented by the party, if represented at all.

## NOTES

1 I would like to thank Saaka Sulemana for his excellent work as an RA for this project.

2 Federally, nine candidates nominated for the 2019 election identified as non-binary (Johnston et al. 2021). Increasing numbers of non-binary candidates should be expected, as gender identities beyond "woman" and "man" become more commonly accepted.

3 For example, none have the profile of Calgary Nose Hill Member of Parliament, Michelle Rempel Garner.

4 This argument is particularly well developed in Chapters 3 and 4 of Celis and Childs (2020).

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